

blinking by orphan_account

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Summary:

In the middle of investigating the case of Will Byers, the Doctor and Donna make contact with ... Well, exactly, *what?*

Originally a one-shot, but thanks to the lovely readers, might evolve.

1. ignition

Author's Note:

A/N: Because I've just finished *Stranger Things* and the opportunity seemed too good to pass up! A very late contribution for @timepetalsprompts theme "confusion".

...

There is a loud crash, some alien-sounding but still evidently vulgar mumble of words, a screech of long-since-oiled hinges — and seconds later, a very ruffled, rather frantic-looking and distinctly *hurrying* Time Lord bursts into the room.

"I think I found out what's actually ha — what the hell."

She's standing in the middle of the room, flushed from excitement and most likely smeared with black paint, a number of colourful blinking lights threads draped picturesquely about her shoulders. She is also staring, with a manic sort of doggedness, at the wall in front of her.

Objectively, his reaction is rather justified, she has to admit.

"Donna?"

Spoken with just the amount of incredulity one could target at a livid redhead clad in a wedding gown who has materialized unwittingly onboard a time-travel spaceship. She knows that voice. She bloody hates it.

"Donna, what —"

"Oh, shut it, you," she snaps, shooting him a highly disgruntled look. "I'm in the middle of something."

His eyes are round underneath those ridiculously wrinkled eyebrows of his, accompanied by a hint of a wince. "I can see *that*. But what —"

"I said, *shut* it."

She's back to fixing the wall with a steady gaze, much like her life depended on it. He closes his mouth, fidgets slightly. Winces even more.

One, two, *three* seconds —

"Seriously, Donna, *what* are you doing? We really should be looking for that poor woman's kid right now, who, as far I can tell must have been kidnapped by a very alien instant of a hungry, bloodlust-driven —"

"I," she says breathlessly, in what could only be described as an inspired voice, "have made a connection with the spiritual world."

She still does not as much as grace him with a glance and therefore can't be *certain* of whether he's staring at her as though she has just declared she wants to become a self-taught Dalek — or not. His silence, however, speaks volumes.

"Before you start yapping away about my being insane," she says shrilly, holding her chin — and, consequently, the blinking lights — a little higher up, "I'll have you know that this, here, is the most purely *genius* communication system in the entire universe, as far as connections with spiritual worlds go. I am obviously going to patent this as soon as my foot treads upon twenty-first century grass again. Copyright: Donna Noble, a professional medium."

She finally glances at him, a challenging *watch it, Spaceman* look that is designed to melt any scowl away from his freckly Time Lord face.

The Doctor, however, is no longer scowling. Quite the contrary: his brows have knitted together, eyes still wide open, a rather worried aura about his whole shape.

"Blinking lights." He says it gently, in a soft voice.

It's exactly this, the fact that he's using a soft voice — a *soft voice* — that riles her up. He has no right to think she's gone mental.

... Not yet.

"Listen, you great big dunce," she retorts, "I've had the whole evening to work it all out. At first, yeah, just blinking. One blink yes, two blinks no. Got that? But then I thought, whoa there, no way. That's not efficient, that's not even *words*. A good temp does not do blinking."

"Donna," he says, slowly, patiently, as if he were addressing a five-year-old. "Donna. *What?*"

"I'm telling you!" she chirps in reply, trying to shake the stubborn fringe from her eyes and succeeding merely in further entanglement within the mess of her precious means of communication. "I figured it all out and now I can properly communicate. I just ask them questions and they answer with the blinks — look, I made an alphabet. It all *works*."

He runs his hand through his hair in a dragged out motion — *oh, what a bloody drama queen, that one.*

"Donna, we're wasting —"

She has to fight the urge to throttle him for being this oblivious.

"*Listen* to me," she orders him. "I'm not kidding around. Here I was, standing here like a proper idiot, thinking, the hell is going on. This boy even still alive? And then the lights sort of ... Sort of flashed, like they were saying *hell yeah, he is!* So here I go, I say: one blink yes, two blinks n —"

"Alright!" he interrupts, openly frustrated now. "Alright, Donna. You're ... you're *contacting the spiritual world*. Via the blinking lights. Now care to tell me who, exactly, is it that you're talking to?"

"Well, *who?*" she shrieks. "The spirits!"

He looks like he has cottoned on to her idea of throttling and wants to apply it in reverse. "Donna, please, we can have this fascinating conversation as soon as we've found this woman's son, I swear. Now, however, we really have to go because he has been trapped in some sort of a sub-universe which —"

"Yes, I know! They told me! Which is a distortion, that is, a negative

reflection of our own world. A bubble, sort of. Dark and cold. Awful place and all that. Now, will you let me *finish*?"

As much as he's going to deny it later, his jaw does go a little slack at that. He stares at her with a familiar mixture of awe and utter confusion painted all over his face. In such moments, the Universe is a kind place. In such moments Donna Noble is a triumphant woman.

"How do you know that?" He sounds almost offended. "I've only just —"

"The spirits told me," she informs him matter-of-factly, unable (and unwilling) to suppress a smirk. "They told me all of it right away, after I installed the system. Where and how to find Will. And, in basic terms, what is the Upside Down. Brilliant, these spirits are. Nice spirits. *Clever* spirits."

She pokes him affectionately on this skinny chest of his to emphasize who's not being clever.

"The spir — what exactly did they tell you? They — who are *they*, anyway? What's their name? How do you know there's more than one of them? Are they, what, creatures that live inside electrical wires? Feeding off light?"

"Down, boy, not so fast! I have no idea — bit shady, that ones are. Won't tell me their names for life. That, and the fact that they're sort of ... uh, talking in monosyllables. You'll see. And *no*, you pillock, they're not any kind of aliens, they're the dead. That's what they told me: they're from the *other side*. Now how many sides d'you think the world has, huh? I say s'not *three*."

Basking in his fairly bemused expression and finding it at least agreeably devoid of self-complacency, she adds, amiably, "And anyway, why don't you ask them yourself? I'm sure they won't mind, even if it's an alien beanpole asking."

"Oi," he says faintly, but she can see he's already melting in his resolve and beginning to find the entire situation just as excitingly curious as she does.

"Alright, let's suppose for a moment it makes sense —"

"Of *bloody* course it does —"

" — well then, how do I ask them?" he raises his voice slightly, giving her a sideways glance. "I just ... I just ask something? A question? I just ask it into thin air and ... ?"

He trails off, rather helplessly.

She thrusts a bit of blinking thread into his hands. "Hold it," she advises, beaming, "that'll improve the connection. Plus, I think, maybe it's some sort of a tradition or whatever, maybe they pretend that this stuff's something like ... like a *sacrifice fire*!"

The look of horrified incredulity is momentarily back as soon as the words *sacrifice fire* escape her mouth but she smothers it down with a glare of her own.

"Go on, *ask*," she tells him flatly, her smile evaporating.

He, however, does not.

Or at least — not right away. They spend another good minute just standing there: a redhead woman in a leather jacket and a tall thin man with crazy, sticky-uppy hair, wrapped in festive decorations like two merry Christmas trees, mid-November, mid-eighties, staring at a wall.

Insert her grandfather's red reindeer antlers and they have a free pass to the nearest mental health facility.

"I can't help but think," he says finally, as though deliberately lingering, "that blinking lights are not, in fact, the most efficie —"

"Oh, for the love of — just get a grip and ask!"

"Fine!" He huffs, running a hand through his hair again. "*Fine*. Hello?"

There is a couple of unnerving seconds during which nothing happens — the lights are stolidly off, the wall blissfully intact, no noise except their own breathing marring the living room's

tranquility. Donna can practically feel the smug complaint building up inside the Doctor's tousled head in order to be further radiated onto her.

Just then, however, the lights in front of them start blinking.

H — E — L —

"Hello."

His mouth forms a perfectly round, perfectly surprised "o" as he gapes ahead and blinks as well.

She can't help but feel a little smug herself. "See? Told ya. *Spirits*."

All of the sudden, he flashes her a toothy grin. "Well, fancy that! You actually, really did it. You contacted the ... uh, *something*. You contacted something. Maybe not the spiritual world but still — Donna Noble. You're brilliant, you are."

She tries not to smile.

"I could smack you for this tone of surprise, you know," she declares, but the annoyance in her voice is thoroughly fake and they both know it. "And I think there's still important stuff to be asked, too."

"What? Oh, yes, right. *Right*." He smacks his lips with relish and squints at the wall. "Er — hello. Again. Who are you?"

There's a brief pause.

"Friend."

"You have friends among the dead?" Donna blurts out before thinking.

He gives her a heavy, heavy look. A look that says nothing less than *no, Donna, you have not just said that*. Not right after I called you brilliant. Fearing the irrevocable collapse of her freshly renewed brilliance status, she intervenes.

"Oh, *come on*, you know I didn't mean it like ... literally. I meant —"

He waves his lights-free hand dismissively.

"Yeah, alright, whatever. And, uh — not that I'm aware of? *Well*, there's been this girl that sort of saved me from a bunch of undead folks some time ago, I suppose. There's always this tiny bit of doubt while doing that sort of thing, like, you know, sacrificing yourself in order to stop an invasion of the undead, of whether you won't end up sailing the same merry boat ... Nasty stuff, this whole undead business is. Still, I don't think this — this *person* I'm talking to is actually dead anyway. I definitely hope not."

Before Donna can as much as comment on his soliloquy, he's addressing the wall again, "What's your name?"

"No."

For a moment, the Doctor looks almost childishly delighted.

"No? Your name is No? That is so —"

"No. *Dangerous.*"

"Your name is — wait, no, I'm thick. *Really* thick. It's dangerous for you to tell me your name because it might spoil the connection, am I right?"

"Yes."

Would she like to compare this conversation to anything at all, it would be more or less like trying to play chess without knowing the rules against someone who's been playing every day since early childhood.

"Oh, okay," the Doctor is saying thoughtfully, nodding to himself. "Dunno how it would work but ... Okay. So, you say you're a friend. You can't tell me your name. Can you tell me *where* you are?"

Another pause, slightly longer this time. The Doctor licks his lips again, now evidently fascinated.

And then —

"Right here."

His eyebrows rocket up. "What?"

"The other side," Donna supplies quickly, in a frantic whisper. "Earlier it — *they* — said, the other side."

"Which, most likely, does not refer to the spiritual realm at all, but to the Upside Down, the same distortion in which Will is trapped," the Doctor muses, nodding again. "Makes sense. Sort of."

After a moment of contemplation, he ventures, "And what are you doing ... uh, *here*?"

"Help."

Another pause.

"I need help."

The Doctor looks faintly alarmed — all curiosity and polite concern, the saviour-of-the-Universe mode full on.

"Help with what? What's going on? You're in danger? Does it have something to do with Will? Is *he* in danger?"

"Doctor, I think it's a *tad bit* too many questions," Donna hisses into his ear. The blinking lights appear to be sharing the opinion with her, as the silence which follows is the longest thus far.

The reply, correspondingly, is the most complex, too.

"The stars are going out."

It's their turn to launch into a confused silence now. If she wasn't sure about the chess analogy earlier, she's definitely certain of it now.

"But ... they're not," the Doctor finally counters, gently. "I've only just been outside, it's already the good amount of dark and ... well, and everything's in place. Trust me, I'd know if it wasn't."

For a considerable amount of time, no answer comes and Donna

begins to worry that her alien freak of a friend has somehow managed to offend the — as she is determined to continue labeling them as — *spirits*.

The Doctor scrunches up his forehead but almost instantly brightens, "Oh, wait, do you mean, the stars are going out in the Upside Down? Huh, I wouldn't say there would be stars there at all, but if you say —"

"No."

"So much for yet another brilliant theory of yours," Donna mutters with amusement, nudging him lightly in the ribs.

"Oh, shut up," she grunts.

Meanwhile, another message is patiently being blinked.

"Everywhere. The stars are going out."

"But ..." the Doctor frowns again, "I don't understand. Where are you? *Who* are you?"

Suddenly, however, both the blinking lights and the lamps begin flashing and flickering in a way that has nothing to do with any code at all. Accompanied by a dry crack and a faint buzzing, everything in the room seems to falter in and out of existence, in and out of the shadow.

The Doctor walks up to the wall by the window and inspects it closely. He then proceeds to tap one of the light bulbs with his knuckles and sticks out the tip of his tongue, as though contemplating giving it a lick.

"The connection's off," he mutters instead. "Something to do with electricity, obviously, and our — er, *spirit* — seems to be quite heavily dependent on it. Coincidentally — or very much *not* coincidentally — such appears to be the case of the exact demogorgon that has been appearing —"

Donna does not register his words anymore, eyes transfixed on the sloppy letters and the faintest, barely noticeable and somehow

desperate staccato of flashes compiling into a message.

"*Bad Wolf*," she whispers numbly, unsure whether she is not tricked by her own brain, indulging in some odd hallucination. *Bad Wolf*, like in this old fairy tale. *Bad Wolf* — what would that even mean? An allegory? A distraction? A trap?

But she's suddenly aware of a rapt, tense, almost solid silence all around. Silence and *stillness*. The Doctor has stopped pacing — in fact, the only thing he's still doing seem to be breathing. Feeling suddenly uneasy, she turns, opening her mouth to ask what is wrong, when —

"*What did you say?*"

His voice is barely vocal at all, a hollowed out half-whisper, half-demand. He's looking at her and there's nothing in his face except for attention, an all-consuming, urgent kind of attention — and something else. Something she can't quite label, something oddly and inexplicably remnant of ... grief?

"I didn't — I mean," she stutters, taken aback, "it wasn't me, it was the bloody lights! I just read what I saw. Or I thought I saw, I'm not even sure, it was just this ... tiny little flicker, really, nothing more. I could have got it wrong. I mean, *Bad Wolf*, what does that even mean?"

And why does she feel like she has to explain herself?

He remains still for a moment, watching her with the same unnervingly fathomless eyes and a tense, almost scared expression. There it is, the answer to her previous question: it *does* mean something. For some reason, she can't bring herself to ask what.

After a few excruciating seconds, he tears his gaze off her and turns it back onto the wall.

"I will ask you one more time. Who are you?" He says in a low voice, the quietest of warnings she's heard from him.

The seconds tick by, increasingly ubiquitous tune of disturbed electricity and almost imperceptibly flickering light. Silence.

And then, slowly and with a sense of effort that should be impossible to exude for an inanimate object such as a thread of blinking lights, the letters start to flash, this time — more vividly.

"*Bad Wolf.*"

The change in his face is much like a blink of light, too, rapid and startling in its spontaneous difference. A new sort of tension overcomes him, the hollowness in his eyes becoming a crippling and equally wrong-feeling vulnerability, hidden beneath an apprehension meant to stifle any potentially lethal emotions. It's not enough; from behind this pinched facade, a traitorous trickle of naïve hope leaks out for Donna Noble's keen eyes to pick up.

Inexplicably (or perhaps not, perhaps by this point she knows him so well that it becomes obvious) she *knows* before he even speaks.

But he does. He breathes out a quiet, "Rose."

Almost instantly, all of the lights in the room erupt jointly into a synchronized glow. One, steady, prolonged blink.

And then, with cracks and a couple of stray sparks, letters follow suit, composing the only possible — and oh, so *familiar* — response.

"*Doctor.*"

He's walking now, marching ungainly as if he were blinded, right to the wall; to touch it with his hand and let it slide down limply as his eyes roam the room, wild now, feverish.

"But this is *impossible*."

His voice, again, is a breathy not-hope and not-even-remotely-its-lack, wavering with the force of his suppressed reaction.

"*What a stupid word.*"

He presses his hand to the wall again, and she can see something overwhelming welling up inside him that washes away the rest of his forced tentativeness, flinging it away carelessly like something unimportant and hindering, an obstacle dodged.

Before she knows it, he's grinning, exhilarated like a child. He looks a couple of centuries younger, standing with his hand splayed on the wall as he exclaims a short and glorious, "Ha!"

And Donna frowns. As entranced as she is by the scene that's revolving in front of her is, she doesn't miss the slight change in the pitch of the buzz that surrounds them. It's not just the electricity now, it's something else, something ragged and terrifyingly alive, something quietly feral, like breathing, like preparing to —

Snap!

The lights crack once more, immersing the room in the shadows, quick as a wave.

"Rose." His voice turns urgent and desperate in a split of second. "Rose, can you hear me? Please, I need you to tell me." He fists his fingers around one of the lights, somewhere around the letter T. "Please. How can I get to you? How do I find you?"

Everything is blinking now, the whole world *blinks*, and it's a constant, rapid leaping between the up and the down, faltering on the edge of the non-light. The breathing turns haggard and she swivels around, vigilant.

"Doctor —" she whispers, but he doesn't move.

"No, Donna, no ... Not yet. No, *Rose*," he retorts, pleads, she can't be sure. Something is morphing into existence right in front of her, slowly sinking into existence with a low growl and crumbling of the wall.

But the lights flash back into life, too, noisily and with the unexpected forcefulness of a last breath — putting up a fight. He's drinking in this message, clinging to it like a raft.

R —

Crack of electricity.

U —

Howling.

"Run."

She grabs his hand and drags him, almost laughably compliant, numb and devoid of any sense of reason — out, out of this house, out of this hideous creature's reach. And away, from the unbearable uncertainty of the wavering light and dark.

He gathers his senses among the crisp November air outside and barks out, "*North*. The fake north. Donna, we have to get to the Hawkins lab."

They're half a mile into the forest when she dares to look back. There is no light to be seen. He's breathing heavily by her side.

He's holding her hand slightly more tightly than usually and she can feel it's trembling.

2. anomaly

Summary for the Chapter:

It becomes a pattern after that: silent shifts of the world, tiny interruptions in its continuity.

Notes for the Chapter:

Written for @captaingrahamcr's prompt: Ten/Rose + "What happened doesn't change anything." Honey, you did the impossible. Just when I thought this fic will be the shameful never finished ghost of mine ... it clicked. And here's the second chapter. I would not be surprised if no one wanted to read it anymore, though. Honestly.

The first time the world falls apart around her, it's the middle of the night.

She's walking down the street, aching head and quick steps. It's the beginning of November and the sneaky wind is undeterred, slithering beneath her hair. The air she exhales dissolves as frayed steam and she wraps herself in the huge Field Department jacket. Dim light shimmers, glistening off the slippery road, submerges the world in murky thick glow that mocks the idea of warmth.

Thinking, oh, brilliant, I'll need to pick up the car anyway. No more inconspicuous sneaking out in the dark or else I'm gonna bloody freeze.

And then the lamps start blinking.

She halts, looking up. The air is suddenly filled with a rustling noise, jagged and buzzing like electricity. The lampposts erupt into and out of light in an unsynchronized disjointed symphony. The street seems to be losing integrity, losing coherence somehow—shadows bundling up into shapes, walls of the ceiling fracturing shakily into muddy wetness. Air smells rotten.

And in the distance, in a shifting spot located somewhere between the seconds of blinking light and rapid sparks of stray electricity, a shape

begins to settle. Something like phosphenes—she presses her eyes closed and it's there and it's familiar—something known, something lost, something almost corporeal.

She's stepping forward unthinkingly, drawn to the lack of light like a moth reversed. Her pulse picks up the rhythm of the flashes. Thickly scented dampness in the air contrasts with dry cracks in her ears. There's something—someone—reaching out but she's dazed, blinded by the flashing and she reaches forward, too, almost—

With a low whine, the light floods the street again, now dazzlingly bright and muffling. Everything stills.

She's standing, stunned, in the middle of the road until the honk of a giant truck chases her off to the pavement, frightened like a surprised cat.

She's breathing heavily.

One of the lamps blinks once more.

...

The walls are white and so is the light around them—clear, sharp and disturbing. Something cold and wicked about the minty scent and sterile air. Something lifeless.

“What kind,” Donna says through gritted teeth, “of a sick, loathsome *monster* would keep a child here?”

She's answered with silence, but even that is not quite *true*—because the panels on the ceiling never cease to emit a faint buzzing noise, barely even discernible, barely even *audible*. It's driving her mad.

The Doctor is bent over an odd contraption on the table, examining it wordlessly with a frown on his face. He shoots her a brief glance. Looks distracted.

“Honestly,” she insists. “This is *disgusting*. They bred her like ... like a bloody rabbit to test their stupid ideas on. What kind of people do that to a child?”

The Doctor straightens up, rotating one of the wires between his

fingers. "The worst thing," he mutters, voice low, "is that they're not stupid."

"What d'you mean?" she asks, crossing her arms. It's not just the *noise*—this whole place is driving her spare, this whole *story*. Alive walls and blinking lights, dead voices and psychic experiments. Missing children.

She has a feeling as though the ground keeps escaping their feet.

The Doctor sets the wire on the table and takes a long breath.

"Well," he mutters, fingers tugging absently at the hair behind his ear—but besides that, he's eerily composed and laconic in his movements.

And maybe that's what bothers her, *too*, because it's not right. It's not right at all.

"Experiments with '*broadening the horizon of human perception*' and meddling with the psyche of a gifted child in order to spy on a foreign country is one way of putting this, Donna," he says finally, hesitantly. "And *lacking*, very lacking. Of course, you can say that the ones performed on the mother of this girl were ... explorations of awareness and some metaphysical sphere of telephatic connection and *that's* where Eleven's powers come from. But that's a vast evasion, and do you know why?"

Donna shakes her head mutely.

"Because it's like ..." he chuckles mirthlessly. "Like explaining photosynthesis without the knowledge about the sun, the chlorophyll or even of the structural composition of the plant. It's taking a *guess*, naming something for the first time, because it's new. And how is that wrong, Donna?"

...

It becomes a pattern after that: silent shifts of the world, tiny interruptions in its continuity.

...

Sitting in a dingy roadhouse, in the middle of a case. Mickey dozing opposite to her, scruffy and tired from the three days of investigation. She's reading the weekly paranormal activity report from Sheffield, trying to pinpoint the similarities with her case. Stirring her coffee lazily with a teaspoon.

And the world starts blinking.

The texture of the spoon becomes fluid, morphs and melts beneath her fingers. Coffee turns lucid and air thick. The lamps above her flicker.

And for a brief moment, she is not part of the world at all, surrounded by shimmery dust.

The air smells damp. Rotten.

...

Frozen in her tracks because something blue and dazzling flashes into existence millimeters from her cheek and flutters away, carrying a faint sound of electricity.

It's a bird and it dies in the air, falling to the ground in a tangle of messy brown feathers.

She drops to her knees. The wings are sticky, gleaming with a grubby thick liquid. It's decaying in front of her eyes.

She doesn't move until it dissolves into muddy earth.

...

"Because," Donna replies tentatively, looking around to find some inspiration in the stark rigidity of the lab. "Because you don't know if the name is right?"

"Because," he muses quietly, "it's only new to *you* and only in this moment. And that doesn't mean it's not been known and named before by someone else."

He stops for a moment, walks up to the wall and gives it a tentative lick with the tip of his tongue. Winces.

“Humans have a tendency for anthropomorphising the world around them. It’s never the other way round. The given alien being that has to become human in order to be accepted. It’s the basis of your society, this notion of innermost rejection of what is fundamentally different. Driven from evolution: change is dangerous and the *novo* possibly lethal. You prefer to be unknowing. All this ... all this pretence of discovering new worlds and cultures, exploring space is in fact nothing but conquering. Not to have, no – to *assimilate*.”

Then he adds, more quietly, “To stop being afraid.”

Donna frowns. “I ... I don’t understand. What’s that to do with anything?”

He cringes ever so lightly. “This technology is not human-invented, Donna. And this lab is not meant to serve as a crib for the evolvment of spyware, even though Brenner probably *does* believe that. But this ... connection that Eleven provides, it’s not really telepathy, or at least not in the sense in which you perceive it. It exceeds human parameters.”

She shifts uncomfortably, growing increasingly more annoyed with his unhurried discursions that somehow *fail* to include the answer to any of her questions—as always.

“Well, what is it, then? An *alien* site for kid experiments?” she asks rather harshly. “How does that even change anything?”

He seems not to hear her. “Funnily enough, even while everyone here talks so much about the Upside Down and about this etheric space in which Eleven can ‘*hear things*’ no one ever bothers to stop and attempt to explain what is either of those places.”

She raises an eyebrow. “But *you* know that?”

“Yes,” he says sharply and looks her straight in the eyes for the first time since they left Joyce Byers’ house that night. “It’s the *void*, Donna.”

Her breath catches and she’s not sure why: perhaps it’s the intent expression of his eyes that somehow manages to appear hollow all

the same – or perhaps some tiny shift in the relentless noise—or perhaps this bloody *place* alone.

But she feels like they need to escape, like someone is bound to barge in and attack them or melt into their world in a horrendous amorphous sensation accompanied by cracking light and scent of burning, like someone is *already* at the doors –

But nothing happens. The Doctor keeps staring at his feet.

After a while, he develops, voice throaty and quiet.

“What Brenner and his people are doing in here is immersing continuously more substantial particles of this world within the void. He’s ... tempting it, meddling with the border. Poking little holes and inviting the negative matter in. Trying out what he can do with it. How *far* he can go.”

He inhales slowly. “And that’s why all of the tests have been so blatantly successful, Donna. Because they shouldn’t be, not normally. But the void is very responsive for stimulus: it’s a negative reflection of any lifeform, so it can bend around and reflect its aspects. It does not exist within the limits of space or time so it can project them and change them – or in this case channel their splinters from one place to another.”

She’s watching him carefully and he seems frustrated. “All this has hardly anything to do with Eleven’s mother, contrary to the opinion of this ridiculous sheriff of theirs. Not unless she’s been heavily drugged and pregnant while dragged back and forth between parallel universes, steadily collecting the good amount of void stuff ... which is *not*, in fact, a plausible possibility.”

Donna swallows. She’s uncomfortable for a whole different reason now: here they are, arriving at the main point of interest this entire day. She clears her throat. Speaks out:

“Parallel universes.”

...

Hurrying down Oxford Street. Dazzlingly bright light and fresh snow.

Thousands of people around her, rushing and hurrying in various directions with unknown aims. She's wrapped in a comforting sense of anonymity and even so persistently uneasy, as though waiting for the crash.

Clouds swallow up the sun and she glances up. Instantly, everything dissipates.

And it's different this time: the smell of ozone in the air and a dull silence collecting sounds. She's standing still but so is the rest of the street, the rest of everything: all of the movement has ceased. Everything has stopped.

But she can move, she can turn around and look at the windowsill of the nearest shop. She's waiting for the scent of decay to leak in, for the world to sink into lightless dampness. Flicker again.

Her heart stills when she realises she's staring at smooth glass but there's no reflection.

The world flutters back to life slowly and she trips when someone pushes her from behind.

The heart resumes its pace frantically but she keeps forgetting to breathe.

...

She wakes up tangled in drenched sheets, breathing heavily, her heart hammering and a ringing noise in her ears.

Barely conscious, she gets up and staggers to the bathroom.

Straps of conversations. Voices. Noises. All swirling with thick dust, hanging in the air.

"Can't you understand? If I could go back and save them then I would. But I can't! I can never go back. I can't. I just can't."

"I can hear you. I keep ... hearing you," she mumbles out incoherently, pressing her forehead to the sink. She feels nauseous. "Can you? Can you hear me?"

Blood keeps humming in her ears.

“Talk to me.”

...

But he doesn't flinch, doesn't even blink. “Yes, the void exists in the ... middle ground, you could say. It's in between.”

Donna bites her lip.

“But you said it's impossible to—”

“Yes,” he says again, this time evidently annoyed. “Are you even listening to me? That's what I've said: not plausible. And this means someone must have prepared Eleven to correspond with the void—I don't know, drench her with void stuff, inject her with condensed radiation, adjust the wavelengths of her brain. And that's just the point, Donna, that's why I said it's much worse given that the ideas are not stupid. Because I'm not sure *I* would be able to do it easily. Plus, I *wouldn't* have done that, not *ever*, because it's too dangerous. It's ... wicked. It's something that ought not to be done. The void is contagious, spreading, all-encompassing. It's like black paint, killing other colours when you smudge it. Last time I've tumbled into it by accident, it nearly killed the TARDIS. Sucked all of the power out.”

He pauses. Mutters, “Whoever designed this all, whoever set this whole mechanism running, is quite literally playing with the devil. And this once, I find it hard to believe it's unaware.”

There's a silence.

The Doctor, leaning against the wall, rubs his face tiredly. Donna's heart is hammering loudly inside her chest. She makes up her mind.

“I probably ought to tell you off proper right now,” she says in a falsely flippanant tone that even to her own ears sounds insincere. “For saying that it's the worst thing, this whole alien *machine of doom* or whatnot, and not the fact one kid's been tortured and the other is stuck in this hell right now.”

He looks like he wants to protest, but she cuts him off. “But I'm not gonna. Just ... tell me. That void communication. Could it be any help in locating Will Byers?”

He fixes her with a weary stare for a long while and then sighs, shoulders slumping. “Yes,” he tells her. “Yes, I believe it will and right now that’s the only thing that keeps me even marginally positive.”

She nods with vigour. “That’s fine. That’s *good*. Just ... one more thing. If we can use it to find him and talk to him and he’s in between ...” she trails off but he offers no response, staring at her dully with a perfectly blank expression, “I mean, could we ... could *you* ...?”

“Could I *what*?”

“You know,” she bites her lip. “Find *her*.”

He stiffens.

“Find ... Rose.”

There’s a while of very heavy silence. The kind that is sticky and almost solid, capturing the world in a painful cluster before it’s cut through with sound. And there are his eyes, dark and silently furious—at the question or at her, she’s not even sure.

And finally, he says, “No.”

...

At the cinema, trying not to fall asleep and blinking lazily at the bluish screen above. But the drowsiness is elusive and misleading and lasts only a while before the picture changes and brightness starts fading out and blaring up—again and again and again.

It doesn’t take her by surprise anymore. She leaps from her seat, skids across the floor which is newly slick with mud, rushing to the corridor. The lights around keep blinking up and dying—and in the shattering reality she picks up a drawn out whine of something living. Something breathing.

She bumps into the large container and sighs out in relief.

Pushing the cheap 3D glasses onto her nose and dabbing herself in the eye

by accident, she inhales sharply.

It's sickening. It's utterly beautiful.

The whole world is crawling with void stuff.

...

"But you said—"

"No, Donna," he repeats forcefully. Donna, however, is not easily deterred.

"—that they're inviting the void here or whatever and that it's in between the universes and that it reflects and channels and—"

"That doesn't change anything," he snaps, interrupting her. He begins to pace, some of his usual energy creeping back, galvanizing him into rapid movement and angry, jerky strides. "Rose is *still* gone and dimensional travel is *still* impossible, lest we want to bring about the total apocalypse. That clear?"

But Donna's arms are crossed already and she ain't taking none of this Time Lord nonsense. She glares at him.

"No, *that not clear*," she retorts. "I don't understand what's the problem here. You talked to her, so it's clearly not impossible to—"

"No, I didn't, Donna, and I'm warning you, *stop right here*," he says quietly and her eyebrows rocket up.

"You *didn't*?" she repeats incredulously. "Hold on there a moment, Spaceboy, because I'm not getting it. If you *didn't* talk to her then what the hell was all this '*Rose, oh Rose! But that's impossible!*' in that bloody house even about?"

He's silent for a moment.

"That was not her," he finally replies curtly as he fumbles with the contraption on the table again. He doesn't meet her eyes. "I was wrong."

“But she recognized you!” Donna protests. “And she said this ... ‘*Bad Wolf*’, whatever it means between you two, a kinky nickname or a codeword or whatever, she *knew* it! And she said she needed help and that it’s not impossible. I saw it. And you saw it, too.”

He remains stonily silent, working his fingers along the wires and detaching small bits in order to stuff them inside his coat’s pockets. And yet even though he’s so stolid again, she can see he’s close to bursting.

“Blimey, she even saved us from that thing in the wall! So why would you say that –”

“But that’s just *it*, Donna, don’t you see?” he barks out, slamming a hand on the table and causing her to fall abruptly silent.

He’s breathing heavily, fixing her with a glare – but there’s too much hurt in his eyes for the effect to be anything else than painfully vulnerable.

“That’s *precisely* it, that’s how I know whoever set all this in motion is dangerous, that’s how I know it’s all much, much more serious than anyone can even suspect! Because I *know* it’s impossible for her to be able to do that and I know it could not happen. So, think, Donna. *Think*. How skilled and how determined to achieve his end must this person be,” he grits out roughly, still not looking away from her face, “how *cunning*, to make me hear *exactly* what I want to hear, exactly what I can *never* have—and almost believe it?”

She tries to reply, but her throat is suddenly tight.

“I’m sorry,” is what she finally manages, “Doctor, I’m ... so sorry.”

He closes his eyes and then straightens up rigidly. When he speaks again, his voice is calm and even. “Don’t be. As I said, what happened doesn’t change anything.”

...

Quentin Graves. Thirty two, not even remotely caring about any sort of a social convention and quite thoroughly done with the whole goddamned beurocracy that Torchwood is.

It's night or perhaps early morning—he's lost the track of time. Only half-conscious, hovering above his gone-cold and fairly disgusting coffee, he's attempting to understand the rows of data in front of him.

He's failing to understand them.

Among this drowsy thoughtlessness, Rose Tyler materialises into existence much like she were some kind of an ethereal creature announcing an unaware mortal.

"I need your help."

Quentin gives a start, nearly spilling the coffee over his reports.

"Tyler, it's the middle of the night," he croaks with a vague note of accusation clear in his voice. "And fuck me if I know why I've ever agreed to this, but I need to finish those reports by tomorrow so that Torchwood kindly continues to pay me. I don't—"

"Everyone thinks I'm paranoid. But I'm not. Quentin, I know why the stars are going out," she says quietly and his complaint sinks into silence as well. He looks up, brain waking up slowly, doused with curiosity.

She's pale as a ghost and her face is full of determination.

His table lamp flickers mildly with a hiss and for a brief moment he's wrapped in a highly ridiculous notion of being transferred into another place. It's murky and dim and smells of dampness and moss, with particles of unfamiliar dust swirling in the air—

But it lasts mere seconds and with a sharp breath, he's back to staring into Rose Tyler's fervent eyes.

"I know why they are going out," her voice is all but a tremulous whisper, "because the same thing is happening to me."

3. incoherence

Summary for the Chapter:

The Doctor does something catastrophic in results.

Notes for the Chapter:

For @arynrds, as a part of the Secret Santa this year!
This chapter was supposed to be about Rose but I've been struggling to get it right and thanks to the Secret Santa decided to tweak things and write a new one, extending the Doctor/Donna plot.

Also, a bit longer this chapter to make up for the long lack of updates!

I do hope you like it <3

(The thing about myths is that the more vague and awe-tinted their subjects are, the more likely we're to see them as divine, isn't it? It's easier to project all of those emotions – all the longing, the lust and the fear, all of the sin committed and suffering endured – onto a being heavenly enough to unquestioningly deserve it.

She'd asked Martha about Rose once, in a coffeeshop in central London, both of them still a bit coughy and faint after the whole Sonataran business. She loaded her order with three packets of sweetener and shot straight ahead.

Martha sniffed and stirred her coffee, jet-black hair over a fine-featured face. Donna tried to picture her hopelessly in love – Martha, who seemed to be the epitome of reason and sharp wit, calm and somehow profound in the vague distance she kept from the world.

"I don't know," she said uneasily, eyes skimming to the window. "He never talked about her. I mean, he did – plenty. But not really. All I know is she had blonde hair, and that wasn't even from the Doctor."

She smiled a bit sourly. "But I like to think of her like this girl from ... have you read 'Till We Have Faces'? It's this book, this ... retelling of a myth, I've always liked it. Eros and Psyche. And she, she's had this

beautiful golden hair and claimed to be loved by a god. And of course, nobody believed her. But she was."

"Bit melodramatic," Donna said dubiously, dipping the tip of her waffle in the caramel coffee. "Besides, he's not really a god, is he? God knows the lot of them shouldn't be so skinny."

There was something in the look Martha gave her that made her realise he might as well be.

And she couldn't quite shake off the vision afterwards. Of Psyche, with golden hair, standing drenched in light and waiting for her Eros in his blue chariot.

As usually, Martha had a point.)

...

They make it to the elevator shaft in silence.

The Doctor sonics the lock for a while until it beeps ruefully and grants them further access with a flash of faintly green light. Inside, he tugs at a protruding metal level and opens a rectangular, metallic-smelling closet.

Before Donna can stretch her neck enough to get a glimpse of its insides, the Doctor thrusts a bright yellow spacesuit-thing and helmet into her hands.

"Here," he says, his earlier vehemence apparently gone already, "put this on. Whatever is down there might be toxic for humans. I think there's some sort of another middle ground before the actual Void, some sort of an outer layer moulded into a semi-solid realm. Remember the blinking lights at Joyce Byers' house? That's how it acts when the border gets unclear and it bumps into the real world, trying to merge."

He pauses for a while. "You know, the black paint metaphor was more accurate than I would've thought. The disturbances are the fumes black paint makes when you dab the brush in a jar of clear water."

"And we're the jar of water, you mean," Donna says dubiously, zipping up her suit. The Doctor dives back into the closet, fishing for something. When he emerges, he's holding up two torches.

"Yes and we're ... *well*, here the metaphor stretches to a certain limit, you can say. Because we're not infected yet, not wholly. I think if we were, the disturbances – we can call it *blinking*, I suppose, for the lack of a better phrase – the blinking would've turned into a continuous occurrence in regular intervals."

"Like, what, a tide? Moon phases?" She's fumbling with the yellow gloves.

"More or less. I suppose they would be far less substantial than that at first. Later on – who knows."

He leans in closer and fastens her helmet securely on her head. "Remember, Donna, don't take it off. I'm not sure what such direct exposure to the Void would do to a human."

Feeling slightly unnerved by this statement, she asks, "Are *you* going to wear one?"

"Yeah," the Doctor says lightly, putting the helmet on. "Although it's different in my case. Shouldn't be all that toxic at all. Might get a bit of a headache, though, and we don't want that. Ready?"

He looks over at her from beneath the little glass window in his helmet, his right hand hovering above the opening button of the elevator.

She nods.

...

She's not quite sure what was the moment it all went pear-shaped. Later on, she supposes it was quite a steady process compiled of a variety of stages.

...

But quite frankly, the very moment she has realised they need to tear

through a slick, oily and disturbingly red surface of something that crept across the entire length of the lab basement's wall, fondling the floor with rotten-looking and *disgusting* tentacles in order to enter the 'middle ground' the Doctor mentioned – that very moment should have been a warning enough for Donna to protest.

But she clenches her teeth and pushes through, right after the Doctor himself – spouting some chirpy and supposedly encouraging nonsense.

The descent into the Hellhole, as she starts calling it in her head, is hardly pleasant.

It's her very world – just as it was, exactly the same, but rotten. Rotten, rotting away, slick and muddy and dark, with thick shimmering dust floating in heavy air and glistening off the moist, half-lucid sludge at her feet. No colours, no light except for the dreary thin streaks of their torchlight and this all-encompassing hollow decay all around. Lifelessness.

She feels sick at the very thought of a child being forced to stay here. Of anyone staying here for a moment longer than necessary.

"Will!" she hears the Doctor call out from beside her – the suit is restraining her movement and orientation a bit – and his voice sounds muffled and unfamiliar underneath the mask. "Will, can you hear me? We're here to help! Will!"

After a moment of stunned silence, she joins in and they trudge up a couple of meters, shouting and pointing the torchlights blindly all around.

Nothing happens.

They're passing through what looks like a distorted mirror reflection of the forest through which they have come to the Hawkins lab, the Doctor's voice slowly turning hoarse from the shouting, when she sees a flicker of light in the distance and she hears a sound.

It's low, gravelly, vibrating and barely even discernible, seemingly coming from a great distance. In all frankness, it might well be the

demogorgon. It might well be a very stupid thing to do. It probably is.

But Donna can't help the first thought that comes to her mind as she hears it.

A wolf. A wolf – *howling*.

She takes a breath and starts yelling. "ROSE! ROSE from the LIGHTS! BAD WOLF! *BAD WOLF!*"

She's cut off abruptly by the Doctor lurching straight into her and nearly knocking off her breath with the force of it. She catches a glimpse of his face behind the bluish glass of his helmet and he looks the a perfect mix of incredulous and livid.

"Donna, what the *hell* are you –" he hisses, attempting to shake her by the shoulders but stymied by the suit.

"Doing you a favour!" she snaps back at him. "If you don't try, you'll never know if she wasn't really here! I know you said she *can't* be but if she is, she can help us, 'cause she probably knows where Will is – so honestly, I'm doing us all a favour and –"

"Well, then, *don't*." He still looks impossibly cross and she's starting to get aggravated herself, fairly certain she's right and he's being thick as usually. "Just don't."

They look at each other furiously for a moment, Donna gathering arguments to shout out into his face when she realises –

"The howling has stopped," she says aloud, surprised. The Doctor blinks, taken aback.

"What?"

"The howling," Donna repeats, looking around. "I heard someone – something – howl, and I thought it might be the Bad Wolf. And it ... stopped. Like it heard me."

He stares at her incredulously, breathing heavily.

"What?" she says defensively.

"The Bad. Wolf. Is not. An Animal," the Doctor bites out and if it weren't for the circumstances, she would have laughed at the very sentence. "It's a name. A phrase. An – an alter ego. Message. Oh, I don't *know* how to explain it. But it's not a bloody wolf, Donna, for God's sake! You heard howling and it didn't occur to you it might be the carnivorous monster that preys on human beings we've barely escaped?"

"Well, it's not like I *knew* all that!" she retorts, somehow torn between feeling guilty and offended. "You never say anything, how was I supposed to know? For all I know, Rose might be bloody Anubis, the amount of information you're willing to share!"

"Maybe that's because it's *not your business*, Donna," he says very quietly and very coldly. "I asked you to drop it, didn't I? So please do. It's honestly not –"

He trails off abruptly as his torchlight stumbles upon something on the ground. His face contorts.

About four feet from the point where they were standing, among the cobwebs, rot and slime, lay a body of a red-haired girl.

A violent wave of nausea overcomes Donna. "Who's that?" she asks shakily.

"I don't know," the Doctor mutters in reply, clearly still aggravated. "But I think I know what happened to her. I need to take a closer look, though. You look around, be careful if no one's coming."

Donna nods silently, eyes transfixed on the body – white, splotted with greenish spots, half-decaying, half-frozen.

He kneels on the ground beside it and takes off his helmet.

She knows something is very, *very* wrong the moment he clutches at his collar and emits a choked up cry.

...

'So,' he says conversationally in a tone which promises at least marginal coherency, but she is quickly disillusioned as he develops.

'Where were we? Ah, yes. The *undead*. I've had a bit of an encounter with them, once. Well. Not once, but – particularly memorable, this one was. I'm ashamed to admit I was rather inclined to the idea at the time. Thought it very organic. Recycling, you see – they're vessels, after all, the bodies ... not your brainwaves, of course, or your ... soul. But honestly, would you like someone to keep your marinated *nose*? Would you like me to keep it for you? I should think not."

Still shellshocked and rather unsure what to answer, Donna looks around helplessly.

The surroundings offer no help, however – bare grey walls, dimmed light, stinking air. And this awful dust. Why did he have to plonk himself down *here*? Why not three bloody feet further round the corner, where she wouldn't be in danger of sniffing the same blasted toxin that made him look at her with ridiculously dilated pupils and tinted his cheeks sickly green.

But of course he has, collapsed onto the floor in a tangle of limbs and a fit of throaty chuckles that made her skin crawl as she shakily disentangled them both from the jumpsuits, tossing them with away with disgust – infected, possibly contagious.

She's dragged him back to the real world after forcing the helmet back on when he started to choke, dragged him limp and yielding through the red stickiness and into the breathable air, galvanized into motion by adrenalin.

But the gravity has returned to normal ever since and for someone so thin he's proved to be really far too heavy for her to keep him steady on his feet.

Oh, if only she could somehow force him to move on his own ...

"Charles Dickens, too," he pipes up suddenly, the pitch of his voice rising again. "Was there." Another pause. "And Rose. Obviously."

Rose. *Ha*.

"Obviously," Donna agrees, mainly for the sake of reminding him she's still there. She attempts to loop his arm around her neck but it slides back down her arm limply as he stares ahead and heaves a brittle sigh.

"She was so ..." he trails off. "So *very*."

"What?"

Well, she has her information sharing, doesn't she? She bloody well has it. Next time she's going to have such a fantastic idea as asking the Doctor to *open up to her*, she might as well bite off her tongue. Or better still, fling herself willingly out into the Void through the TARDIS door.

If they ever make it back to the TARDIS. A sudden and quite crippling vision of a life without the TARDIS, stranded in the 1980s with a mentally ill Doctor cut up for body parts by Brenner's scientists in his stinky lab stretches precariously in front of her eyes.

"The trouble with you humans," the Doctor says plaintively, snapping Donna out of her rather ill-timed reverie, "is that you're all so young. That's disastrous."

"Well, I suppose, judging by your standard," she allows, making another attempt at threading his uncooperative arm round her neck and locking it by gripping at the wrist. This time, he does not struggle. "I don't see what's so disastrous in being less than nine hundred years old, though."

"*Nineteen*," he supplies rather testily and she stills her movement to scowl at him.

"Nineteen hundred?" she repeats incredulously. "What, are you saying you've been bluffing all along? There's a world of difference between nine hundred and bloody nineteen hundred, mate. It's like out with Middle Ages or the Roman Empire. Pick one, will you?"

He looks at her as though she were a mosquito that sat unwelcome on his skin. The effect is slightly dampened by the fact he looks pretty much like he's recently been through yellow fever. "Nineteen,

she was. Back then."

"Oh," is what escapes Donna's lips. She feels rather stupid and hastens to add, "That's ... *young*."

Nineteen. Nineteen can be a Psyche still, but nineteen can also be starting college and nineteen can be wearing low-waisted jeans and dying your hair pink on a whim.

...

("You don't know when she was from," Martha pointed out. "Could have been ... I dunno. Eighteenth century France.")

"Bit uptight, isn't it, though?" Donna observed. "And prudish."

Martha scoffed and dipped a biscuit in her coffee as well. "As if he's not both.")

...

"And so ..." the Doctor trails off again, an almost dreamy look on his face, "so ... *alive*."

Donna's eyebrows rocket up as she secures her grip on his wrist and tries to haul him up to a standing position.

"Well," she grits out rather sarcastically, gasping with effort as he offers no help, merely hanging loosely at her side. "Against all the undead around, I'm sure that made a *striking* characteristic, Doctor."

He gasps as well, as though it was him straining under the weight of a very skinny-looking tow truck and not her.

"Oh, but she'll *die* on you. She'll blow away like *smoke*." He inhales sharply, tensing suddenly and almost causing her to collapse. "Who said that? When – ah, no, no. Wrong. Wrong, not ... *yet*."

He blinks and to her greatest surprise lets out a strangled moan. "This gets so confusing sometimes, I ... I can't seem to keep up."

And oh, how hollow and clouded his eyes look. "Something seems to

be wrong with me, Amy. Something very odd indeed."

The success of heaving him up and propping against the wall has strained her previously reeling mind so she asks, quite nonsensically, "Who's Amy?"

But he's staring at her hair with a look of disgust on his face. "I've always thought the Little Mermaid to be more than a little problematic," he reveals, rather haughtily. He tries to catch a wisp of it and dabs himself in the temple instead in a clumsy looping motion. "For example the clams. Didn't it bother you?"

She's beginning to lose her temper. Tragic lovers and undead people are one thing but if he thinks they're going to have a conversation about the *Little bloody Mermaid*, well, he'd better think again.

"No," she snaps. "No, you *twat*, it didn't."

It's not fair to treat him like this, not when he's so clearly not in his right mind, but she can't help herself.

And he doesn't seem to mind, now addressing the ceiling as his head hangs back limply, eyes half-closed. "Ginger. And rude. Rude and ginger. This is like a personal vendetta against me. *Shockingly* conceited."

He looks down at her before she can question how anything in being ginger can be labelled as conceit and says, accusingly. "And the blasted pyjamas."

He seems so delighted by the rather dubious curse that she bites back an insult. *Slow steps*, she tells herself. She has to get him moving, and now, but it has to be in slow steps.

"I'm not wearing pyjamas," she offers, pulling him gently as she steps forward in a very slow motion. To her surprise, he complies, moving along.

"Sure you are, old Carrot Top," he says merrily and pats his left pocket with the free hand. "As good as new."

She doesn't comment on either of those statements, utterly focused on

getting him to move. She's already getting a bit of a headache and driving herself spare debating whether that's really the toxic fumes or just this absurdly draining conversation.

They manage to tiptoe to the very corner when he halts abruptly, before blurting out, "Oh, crumbs. I forgot. That's ... that's unthinkable, really. Insoluble."

"In – *what?*" Donna says, trying to find at least a vague connection between the words he utters. "Insoluble?"

"Insufferable, silly," he corrects her, shaking his head with a gentle smile. He doesn't sound like himself in the slightest, slipping in and out of unfamiliar accents.

There are beads of sweat trailing down his forehead and he's ghastly pale, his pupils so dilated that she can only guess at the presence of an iris at all.

"Ninety percent of media appearance failures are prompted by unnoticed wardrobe malfunctions. In fact, ninety point twenty-four. I like being precise with numbers. Gives one such a sophisticated air, don't you think?"

He sighs, continuing in a rather melancholic way, "Will you fetch me the cravat, Grace? I'm sure it's still at the morgue."

"We're both gonna be there as well, if you don't move," she grumbles ominously, trying to push him forward.

"Oh, *splendid*," he replies, standing stubbornly still. And then, after a while, "Those ruddy orthodontists. Never in my entire life have I dislodged a tooth willingly. Remember that, will you?"

Feeling suddenly crushed and hopeless, Donna manages a feeble, "Sure I will, Doctor."

He tenses up at that, his hand clutching at her shoulder, fingers digging into skin through the fabric of her jacket, and gasps, hoarsely, sounding slightly more conscious than hitherto, "Rose, are you alright?"

Donna keeps stonily silent, feeling wrong both to answer and correct him.

"I ... I can't see you properly," he tells her in a hushed voice. "You'll have to move. Something happened and I .. I think I might have been poisoned. There was a toxin in those fumes. *Eutheilaxin thaudi*. It's not discovered yet. Not ... not lethal. Not to me. But highly hallucinogenic. I will have to metabolise it but I might be out of focus for a while ... You're alright, though, aren't you? Sure you are, you clever girl. Probably off doing all the hammerwork. I do hope you're still there, though. For a moment I ... I thought you were gone."

He closes his eyes and exhales shakily, still clutching at her arm, and he looks so sad Donna's heart breaks a little for him. Oh, stupid, *stupid* alien, getting himself in such a state.

She honestly hopes he won't remember that. He'd probably die of mortification if he did.

"And you ... you *know*, I have told you, haven't I? One thing you need the most." He cracks a smile and looks at her with wide unseeing eyes. "A hand to hold."

He does hold out his hand, which is shaking so violently he nearly pokes her in the stomach. Led by an impulse, Donna catches it and twines their fingers together.

Miraculously, something in his face twitches. "*Donna*. I don't – how long was I out?"

"About half an hour maybe," she says quickly, squeezing his hand and hoping it will anchor him in reality for a little while longer. "And then you started babbling. Is that a proper reaction to this? I mean ... you're not going to *die*, are you?"

"I should hope not," he says sourly, not exactly the answer she was looking for. "Oh, Donna, you shouldn't have taken off the helmet."

Her eyes narrow. "I haven't, you moron, *you* did. Time Lord resistance, my ass. And look at you now! How long are you gonna be like this? Or is it over now?"

He winces then, as though involuntarily, and for the first time she adds two to two and cottons on that he might be in pain. "I'm afraid not, not yet," he grits out, clenching his jaw. "An hour at least. Before I can ... metabolise it. *Highly* hallucinogenic."

"Yes, you have mentioned it," she says quietly. He swallows with effort.

"Have I?" And he groans again, bending forward and coiling himself like he was punched in the gut. "This gravity ... stabilising ... *thing* ... appears to be botched. I shouldn't have let Rickey touch it."

"Maybe let's go and fix it, then?" Donna suggests hopefully, tugging him out into the corridor. "You can't do anything about it here but I'm certain the TARDIS will let you tinker."

He somehow manages to drag him round the corner and propel against the wall before his knees give way and he drops to the floor with a hollow whine.

She crouches beside him, unsure what to do. Check his temperature? She's pretty sure she doesn't have to check, given the sheen of sweat on his skin. Drag him on the floor? Oh, but he's too heavy, the alien bugger ...

Call for help? But call *who*?

"The thing is, Rose, we can't do that," the Doctor speaks out softly and Donna bangs her forehead against the wall.

Fucking. *Hell*.

"Not that I wouldn't like to," he adds wistfully. "In fact, I would. But we can't. Would you light a match by flying up to a supernova? I don't think so. I don't think you would have liked the ash. So much ash and this time it wouldn't even be snowing. And I wouldn't want you to burn, Rose. Not again. Back then ... it was quite hopelessly thrilling, if we're both honest. Do you remember how it tasted? The time, I mean. It's sour in taste, isn't it? Thick and sweet. But bitter. I'm so glad you didn't choke on it. The light was so blinding I couldn't even look at you."

Donna stares at him mutely, trying to make sense of his words and a picture of Psyche (looking suspiciously like a blonde Liv Tyler in Arwen's wispy robes) in golden light crops up in her head again.

"Which is to say ... this. We, um," he trails off and scrunches up his forehead, clearly trying to concentrate. "It's, you understand, unwise, completely and absolutely ... ah, lovely. You're very ... *lovely*."

Lovely. A *shockingly* descriptive adjective, that. Donna wrestles with a pointless urge to scream and kick the wall ahead.

"*And time goes by so slowly*," says the Doctor incoherently, "*and time can do so much. Are you still mine?*"

Or his shins.

"If you're gonna be so talkative, you could at least tell me something *useful*," she tells him sternly.

He turns his head slowly. Blinks owlishly. Finally gives her a very tentative, slightly sheepish smile.

"Damn, Rose," he muses. "Am I not glad you can't hear all this. *Righteous Brothers* were awful. That being said, this particular stream of consciousness is trickling rather slowly. I must be quite tired."

"Don't you say," Donna sneers. "And here I was, thinking you were *as good as new*."

"New new new Doctor," he agrees with her, nodding his head sharply. "I had a dream recently. It was sort of white all around and you weren't there anymore. And your hair, *oh*, your hair lit up in the air like you were blinding again, but this time cold. You burned so entirely, all cold, and I didn't even get to see the smoke, I ..."

To her horror, his eyes seem to be getting wet. The words come out ragged and sharp, "But that's not right. That's too soon. You're there, aren't you? Up there. Which means, obviously, that you shouldn't be worried. And you shouldn't worry me. So stop. I'm going to come back up there as soon as I deal with this red voice. I think that pink zippy jacket is a bit too bold, by the way. Maybe that's why we attract so much attention. Maybe if we didn't wear these clothes ... I

could use some calm, Rose. Maybe we should slow down. *Maybe.*"

His voice descends in the pitch as he speaks. He snuffles.

"Have you ever been to Croydon, Donna?"

The shift in the intended recipient is so rapid she nearly bangs her head on the wall again, this time by accident. "Yeah," she confirms a little breathlessly, "plenty of times. Why?"

"That's where I was supposed to drop her off, Sarah Jane," he says as if it explained everything. "Thing is, I screwed it up. I always get the goodbyes wrong. You mustn't let me screw it up with you. Promise."

"Oi," she says indignantly, poking him in the ribs with her elbow. "I'm not going anywhere, Spaceboy. And you're not either. You're stuck with me. And you better be *glad*."

He looks at her evenly, looking very tired and grey-faced but somehow, a little bit more present. "That I am," he says meekly.

"I miss her, though. I mean – Rose," he adds after a while in this oddly accusatory voice and looks at her with vague resentment, the clarity in his eyes not yet lost but clouding up. "I hope it doesn't upset you. It's just ... I can't help it, you know? It's always been so involuntary with her. I can't. Help it."

He clenches his fists and then lets them fall to his lap lifelessly, frustrated.

Donna is aware of the lump forming in her throat. "Oh, you *are* stupid," she tells him and he smiles weakly, looking at her with half-lidded eyes. And then coughs violently.

She means to go on, say something vaguely supportive or teasing or helpful.

She's cut off by a flood of red light and the alarms blaring.

"Oh," the Doctor intones cheerfully, "So Koschei was right after all! They *do* have the drums."

4. annunciation

Summary for the Chapter:

Meanwhile, on the other side ...

Notes for the Chapter:

A/N: I've been struggling with this chapter for a long time but I actually like how it turned out! It's a bit less condensed and shorter than I intended – not everything is yet cleared up (: and I'm not yet sure whose point of view should the next one be from. Let me know what you think!

The computer emits a vaguely annoyed low whine.

The man hunched over in a creaking chair twitches violently. He straightens up—feeling the little bones by his neck crack with a hollow sound and *ah, he should exercise more, he bloody well should*—and leans forward, squinting at the monitor. His glasses, pushed up the forehead, seem to go unnoticed by their owner.

Rows of hardly grammatical sentences gathered in seemingly pointless clusters dance in front of his eyes.

“Tyler, I think we’re onto something here,” Quentin Graves croaks throatily, drumming out the *Full Monty* theme with the tips of his fingers.

There is no reply. After a while of peering at the digits in front of him with considerable effort, he looks over his shoulder. “Er, Tyler? You still there?”

She’s asleep.

Huddled on the medical table—or at least, Quentin supposes, that has once been the *intended* use of the piece of furniture in question—by the wall, with her hair splayed all over her face and mouth parted, she’s heaving shallow breaths. Wrapped in a grey wool blanket which has more than one wide hole in the garment, she’s also unconsciously

clutching to her chest a large binder full of blue sheets.

In the stuffy, dusty air of his cluttered study, a sleeping Rose Tyler looks drastically out of place.

Quentin clears his throat awkwardly. Humans. No, humans are decisively *not* his forte.

(Humans are not why one becomes the head physicist in bloody Torchwood, either.)

“Tyler,” he repeats, louder and more than a little uneasily.

“Mm, jus’ a second,” comes a rather muffled purr. “S’early.”

“Well, that is correct, it’s two in the morning,” Quentin states matter-of-factly, glancing back at his computer’s monitor, “but I think you’d like to hear that. First of all, the house you told me about. It ... well, *exists*.”

Rose inhales sharply and her eyes snap open. She watches him dully for a couple of seconds, puffy honey-coloured eyes in a tired face.

And then—

“No shit,” she says groggily, swinging her legs heavily onto the floor and crawling up to the empty stool by his desk. Quentin’s nostrils are suddenly assaulted with the intense if pleasant scent of her perfume mingled with sleep and—presumably his—cigarettes. He backs off marginally, reaching for the pack of them lying in the corner of the desk. Halfway through, his hands meets an unexpected obstacle.

Coffee he’s forgotten to have ever made spills over with a wet splash. Rose shoots him an annoyed glance. “Oh, for God’s sake.”

“Bugger that,” he agrees with her, looking at the drenched documents and debating for a brief moment if he should clean up. Deciding against it, he gently detracts the cigarette pack from the now damp pile of ... *objects*, he settles for, lacking a better generalisation, fishes out one of them and places between his teeth.

“There’s a problem, though,” he says vaguely, patting the pockets of

his rather shabby and once-white lab coat, “the house belongs—well, has belonged—to a woman by the name of Joyce Byers. She’s been living there with her two sons over twenty years ago.”

“And the problem is ...?” asks Rose, sparing him another wary glance.

Sickly blue light spills over her face—soft features, prominent cheekbones and full lips. It crosses Quentin’s tired mind that Rose Tyler’s skull would be quite interesting, given its shapely proportions. He shakes off the thought quite quickly, vaguely disgusted by his own attention span.

No wonder he has the average of one friend in an internationally spread institution.

“The problem is, strictly speaking, that it’s located in Indiana,” he says aloud. “USA, Indiana, I mean. This—and the fact that it hasn’t been occupied for more than twenty years. Apparently, no one’s interested in buying it, too. There’s some sort of an urban legend, ghosts or spirits or something. To quote Mrs McLellan, the very amiable wife of a local butcher, ‘the place stinks wicked’. Byers’ younger son, the so-called Will, has apparently had a very peculiar episode of being—another quote—‘dragged to hell and back due to practicing satanist masses with his peers’. And that’s not even all of it. Apparently, not far away from the place, is an abandoned military site. There wouldn’t have been anything particularly interesting about that, perhaps, if not for the fact that a large portion of the town’s community claims there’s been ‘paranormal activity’ going on there, as well as immoral experiments on some mentally ill child called Eleven. All this, naturally, has been going on in Mrs Byers and her sons’ time.”

For the first time, Tyler looks over at him with something resembling admiration in her eyes. “Are you telling me you’ve been chatting up to the butcher’s wife all this time? *Quentin*, you wild thing. Probably told her you’re a journalist, eh? Poor confused British paranormal activity enthusiast, misunderstood and—”

“*Gathering data*,” he corrects her sourly and flinches at Tyler’s obnoxiously smug grin. “It’s called gathering data. And much more

productive that the nap you've had back there, too."

"Shut up," says Rose, not unkindly, and reaches over the piled up rubbish to the thermos at the back. "I haven't slept properly in three days, trying to make out something from all this mess. M'only human."

"Besides," she adds as an afterthought. "You're doing brilliant. S'probably all a piece of cake for you."

He gives her a hopefully incredulous—and not merely tired—look. "Tyler, have you any idea what it means to localise a bloody house in the whole world based on a dream? Let me tell you, it's—bordering on *miracle*, that's what it is."

She gives him a sideways glance, sipping the—cold, presumably—beverage from her thermos. "Apparently not so much, Quentin, seeing as we're looking at the house's high resolution picture. And you're aware, I hope, that you're smoking an unlit cigarette, yeah?"

He has, as a matter of fact, not been aware of that. Removing it from between his teeth and tossing away to the bin, he says, "Let me get this straight, Tyler—we've been poring over all this stuff for two days, tracing a house that you've dreamed up, and where, as you've put it, a portal to another dimension has opened up. That correct?"

She's shaking her head, "No. Not opened up. May possibly develop. And not a portal, a ... a hole. Of sorts. A tear in the fabric—"

"—of *time and space*," he finishes, not even trying to devoid this short statement of sarcasm. Rose gives him a nasty look and he holds up his hands defensively. "All I'm saying, if we're gonna spend another night holed up here, you might as well tell me something substantial instead of those enigmatic little hints."

She's chewing on her lower lip, reading through his lengthy conversation with Fiona McLellan.

"We're not gonna be sitting holed up here, Quentin," she says finally, as though reluctantly. "Tomorrow we're flying to the States."

"*What?*" Quentin squeaks, sobering up instantly. "Now, Tyler, I've

never agreed to—”

“Get some sleep,” she advises him, giving his shoulder a friendly pat, and saunters out of the study.

Dejectedly, he reaches over to fish out another cigarette.

...

The air next morning is cold and crisp as Quentin scrambles up the parking lot behind Torchwood’s main training site. With a folder full of long overdue reports—the filling of which he’s been putting off for a truly impressive amount of time—tucked under his side, clad in a yellow parka and with glasses perched snugly upon his nose, he’s trying to work out what exactly is the nagging feeling of having forgotten something important in relation to.

He’s coming to a vague conclusion that it might have to do with the six unanswered calls from the morgue when he spots Rose Tyler leaning against her Jeep with two cups of takeaway coffee.

“Wotcha,” she says briskly, shooting him her trademark big smile that has been singlehandedly occupying the front pages of British tabloids for the past two years.

...

He’s always been impressed at how much she manages to look and act like a posh heiress of a well-off businessman in those pictures and videos.

Especially given the fact she mostly wears muddy wellingtons, chases alien smugglers for a living and have spent the first hours of her stay in this particular universe ranging from being completely devastated to slamming her fist down onto the Torchwood questioning team’s table, yelling out that, *I’ll give you fucking bureaucratic hyenas fucking information about the fucking Doctor when you think of a clever way to send me fucking back to him, is that fucking clear?* and smashing Stella Watson’s (psychologist, Public Relations Department, closely related to Dolores Umbridge, in Quentin’s humble opinion) pink and conciliatory cup of tea to pieces.

He distinctly remembers being highly entertained with her performance. To this day, it remains widely and fondly reminisced as one of the most thrilling episodes in the history of In-Torchwood Drama.

“You should be an actress. You’d be good at that,” told her once, leaning against the counter of the Investigation Department’s little kitchen, as they were taking a break from the case of a particularly ill-tempered Zygon roaming the streets of Belfast.

“Sod off, Quentin,” Rose replied, throwing him The Look, an expression which Mickey Smith often likens to ‘shit getting real, mate’.

He’s never returned to the topic.

...

Her blonde hair is pulled up in a messy ponytail now and she’s wearing knee-high boots and a leather jacket. “Hop in. I bribed the security warden—you know Scarface Joe? Big nasty bloke with a scar across his face? That’s the man—to let us drive away without checking out.”

Quentin can’t help but feel a little bit impressed. “Tyler, the man’s Medusa reincarnated. How are you even still alive?”

She rolls her eyes. “Don’t ask. All the diplomacy training coming in handy.”

He crams himself ungainly into the angular car, wondering how on Earth can a Jeep feel too small to fit into and having an unpleasant flashback of his little and Mexican mother peering up at him and whining that *leave this damned science, Tino, you could be an NBA player!*

Tyler’s voice wrenches him out of the grim reverie about basketball. “The plan is as follows: we get on a zeppelin to Indiana, snuffle around the house, maybe question some of the locals, try to fit the place to my theory. All clear?”

He quirks an eyebrow. "Does the plan include enlightening me in the *'I know why the stars are going out'* department?"

Rose nods, smiling. "That, too. Well, more or less. You'll see."

The engine revs. They leave the parking lot without checking out.

(Quentin feels the security warden's eyes bore into the back of his head long afterwards.)

...

"Quarks?"

"Subatomic particles. Postulated as the building blocks of the hadrons. And I'm not telling you anything else, Tyler, because we're straying from the topic. *Again*," he looks over at her irritably. "Honestly, make up your mind. Either let me work or let me know what we're bloody doing."

"Hold up. We're nearly there," she replies, unfazed.

Sure enough, as soon as they take another left, the airport is looming in the distance. "Our flight's at eight, we're going to pop in to the store for a moment before we leave. There's something I wanna check."

"Something like, are we being followed by a horde of my father's concerned agents or something like, an important clue in my vastly complex case?"

"Both," she tells him laconically.

...

"There's this song," she's saying, tugging at a wisp of her blonde hair and sounding a little sheepish. "I keep hearing it ever since ... well, ever since it all has started. I'll explain more on the zeppelin. S'just, I can't stop thinking it has something to do with all this."

"A song," he states. Rose worries her lip, avoiding eye contact as they move along the music section in the mall next to the airport. "A

bloody song.”

“You’ll see,” she repeats stubbornly. “It all makes sense. Sort of.”

He heaves a rather dramatic sigh. “What song?”

“Well, it goes like ...”

...

By the time they have queued up to the counter at the airport, he’s convinced that his own brain is launching a massive vendetta against him via the lyrics to *Should I Stay Or Should I Go*.

“Why, Tyler,” he snaps at the stone-faced Rose, “you were right. I can’t get it out of my head, either. An important clue, it surely is!”

“Don’t do that, you sound like a latino Yoda,” she retorts inconsequentially and lunges to the counter before he can develop.

“Hello, I have booked a private flight to Indiana.”

If Quentin quirks an eyebrow at the ‘private’, it’s so that she doesn’t notice. *After all*, he thinks to himself, *someone brought up penniless in Powell Estate by a hairdresser is certainly entitled to, well, live a little after being magically turned into a millionaire’s daughter*.

“That would be captain Lynda Lewis?”

“Yes,” says Rose with a nostalgic smile he doesn’t understand. “Lynda with a y.”

...

He remembers the beginning of their rather unexpected acquaintance—her first day at Torchwood, not long after arriving in the universe.

Various rumours were circulating about Pete’s daughter-not-daughter by that time, just as they had once been about Mickey. That she had been a shopgirl, that she had been abducted by a time-travelling alien, that she had been in love with the alien, that she suffered from a rare kind of lycanthropy and in fact could turn into a wolf on

command.

Quentin, on his part, didn't think too much of it at the time. He was sitting quietly, minding his own miserable business, in the Investigation Department's kitchen, stirring a cup of tasteless coffee and trying to remember the last night that he had peacefully slept through.

It wasn't until she stood hovering by his table—dressed in a black hoodie, with vacant eyes and ruffled hair dyed blonde, looking barely twenty—that he realised everyone was staring.

“Uh,” Quentin said eloquently.

“Can I sit here?” Her voice sounded young, too. And absent.

“Um,” he replied. “Yes, obviously. May I ask, though—because I'm not, you see, usually considered the epitome of fun company in Torchwood's circles—er, why *here*?”

She looked at him, with those hollow eyes, looking impossibly sad and he thought, for what felt like a thousandth time in his life, that gossiping and nosy human beings are the worst plague to date.

“You look like you're not sure if you want to be here. I'm sure I don't.”

Quentin nodded. “Fair enough.”

...

*So come on and let me know
Should I stay or should I go*

“Damn it, Tyler.”

...

You may now unfasten your seat-belts. We wish you a pleasant journey.

Rose promptly does as told, stretching in her seat like a blonde cat,

wary eyes darting across the aesthetically pleasing inside of the zeppelin.

“Alright, Quentin, now we may talk.”

“What, that a Christmas miracle?” Quentin says in a disgruntled voice. Flights have never agreed with him—or rather, one of them has once disagreed with him quite violently, leading to him passing out in the middle of the aisle as soon as the zeppelin has taken off. He’s not very fond of them ever since. “The magical time of sharing precious information with mortals?”

She gives him a very stern look and he recollects the frightened and lifeless expression she’s been wearing when she showed up in his study two days prior, one that reminded him of renaissance paintings of the Annunciation.

He gives her an apologetic wince.

“Remember the last conference about the stars?” she asks quietly. “Three weeks ago. Stella gave this dreary speech about keeping the nation informed for coverage. There was this issue of ecological marches surrounding the Biology Department, accusing us of meddling with the ecosystem or whatnot. Pete’s been shouted over when he proposed introducing martial law in response to the tensions caused by the shifts in the day and night duration and forming an alliance with U.N.I.T. Mickey has postulated to draft an evacuation plan to Mars and almost everyone voted for even though it makes no sense, ‘cause Mars’d be just as affected as the Earth if the Sun died. But it was the only marginally coherent idea beside Pete’s, everyone else was just sort of panicked and eager to blame the heads.”

“Yeah, I remember. What I also remember was is you, being uncharacteristically quiet. I was quite surprised you haven’t spoken out, to be frank,” Quentin points out.

“That’s because I was ...” she hesitates. “I was very sick, Quentin. Constantly dizzy, feverish, with waves of cold sweat and nausea hitting me all the time. I took a lot of meds, ‘cause it was supposed to be so important, this conference. And I just sort of sat there, all woozy and detached, listening to all this nonsense and knowing

they're wrong but having no idea what to say so that I don't sound mental and no energy to protest either."

Quentin frowns. Rose Tyler does not do 'sick'. He doesn't remember her ever taking a day off or coming down with anything more severe than a runny nose or a sore throat. And even then, he can only picture her at work, talking her way hoarsely through yet another investigation or sniffing over an alien corpse in the morgue.

"What was the sickness?"

Rose smacks her lips. "But that's just it. I don't know. I don't even think it's a sickness at all. Just ... give me a moment."

She leans over to her handbag and when she straightens up, she's holding up a pair of plastic 3D glasses in her hand.

Quentin's eyebrows rocket up. He looks around the deserted zeppelin dazedly. "We're gonna watch a film?"

"No. Put them on, don't look at me. I'm going to call a stewardess and you tell me if you see something peculiar about her. Just don't look at me, alright?"

He can't help a grimace. "Tyler. You're, truthfully, one of the very few people in this whole goddamn institution that I consider sane," he says slowly. "But, for Christ's sake. Dreams? Songs? 3D glasses? Are you su—"

"Trust me," Rose cuts him off, eyes earnest and pleading and he's taken aback by the extremely tense expression of her usually guarded features and strained tone of voice. "*Please*. Please, just let me explain. I need ... I need an ally."

Feeling rather idiotic but unable to refuse her intent gaze, Quentin perches the glasses on his nose in front of his own and stares ahead. He hears Rose press the 'call' button.

The stewardess comes, gives them a bottle of white wine and glasses, then goes away. The sense of idiocy doesn't leave him, despite the fact that the woman is trained well enough not to comment on him watching an invisible movie on an invisible screen.

As soon as she leaves, he blurts out, “Absolutely nothing.”

To his surprise, Rose nods. In a slightly nervous voice, she says, “good. Now look at your hands.”

He does. His hands look ... well. They look like human hands when looked at through cheap 3D glasses. Quentin sighs.

“Tyler ...”

“*Shut up*. Now look at me.”

He does. And nearly jumps in his seat.

All along Rose’s body, twitching and swirling herds of little black spots are accumulated, alternating places and following the arch of her hands as she gives him a little wave. “See? There’s a difference, right?”

“Tyler, what the *hell* is that?” he manages to splutter, both entranced and repulsed by the incessantly moving black halo of dots about Rose—reminding him, if he’s looking for a comparison at all, of a model of swirling atoms in a particle.

He yanks the 3D glasses off in a sharp movement. Disturbingly enough, Rose looks like the epitome of normal without them, maybe apart from the feverish glow in her eyes.

“Void stuff,” she replies, voice shaking with emotion. “They’re those ... *moties*, you can say, which attach themselves to you when you travel between the Universes. I have them, and Mickey does, and mum and Pete, ‘cause we’ve all ... well, jumped. You can only see them through 3D glasses.”

He feels dizzy. “And the Void is ...?”

“Void’s the middle ground. This dead space between the universes, keeping them from bumping into one another or merging. And it’s very dangerous, ‘cause ...” she trails off abruptly, oddly hesitant. “When we’ve ... tumbled into it by accident, it nearly killed the TARDIS, sucking out all of its power. We ... the Doctor had to give up some of his regeneration energy to revive it.”

There's a brief silence and Quentin's brain registers two facts—first, that he's never heard Rose Tyler say *the Doctor* before (not counting the shouting back in the questioning office). The only mentions of his name uttered in his presence were vague 'he' or 'him' and even more vague allusions.

The name sounds uncannily soft and quiet in her mouth, like something private she's unwilling to share. Something treasured.

And the second—for the first time, it strikes him where the path of her thinking leads. And *oh*, he's not been clever.

"Those dreams you've been having," he speaks out, struck with a sudden clarity. "They're connected to him, is that right? The Doctor?"

She nods curtly. "Yes. Although they're ... not really dreams. More like visions, you know? Snippets of someone else's reality. They feel *wrong*, somehow—my head hurts each time I have one of those and I'm almost always nauseous. Sometimes, I get just mute pictures, sometimes sensations, sometimes conversations. Sometimes it's all of it together. And there's this ... this physical aspect, too. Every time something happens in those dreams, it feels like this has happened to me. I wake up with bruises all over my body. I wake up coughing because there's a toxin in the other London's air. Or my feet are bleeding because someone, somewhere, has travelled the Earth on foot."

She laughs faintly at his horrified expression. "Oh, don't look at me like that. I'm not dying. That's just ... an *inconvenience*."

He's about to protest when her wristwatch gives a little shrill beep.

"And we're arriving at the main point of the programme," Rose says with a rather dark smile. "Tell me, Quentin, have you ever had a feeling ... that the world is falling apart around you? And I don't mean it metaphorically. Have you ever felt like reality is crumbling away, rotting, like you're suddenly wrenched out of your place and stuffed into something already dead?"

He wants to disagree, but he's hit with sharp and unpleasant recognition. He can almost feel the stinky dampness in the nice-

smelling inside of the zeppelin.

“I ... yes,” he says slowly. “Twice. Once, back when ... back when the first two stars disappeared and we were on a case in the middle of the night. The world seemed to sort of disintegrate for a moment. And then, the second time, two days ago. When ... well, when you’ve come to my study to ask for help. It was quite fleeting.”

She nods, wincing. “Yeah, well. It’s happening ... a little bit more intensely to me, I’m afraid, and a little bit more frequently. So much that I’ve grown used to it in a way and managed to—well, test a few things.”

She gives the pilot’s cabin a sideways glance. “If I’m correct, it rarely strays from this ... this pattern I’ve established—s’like a tide, really. Or moon phases. And so, there’s another—*blinking*, I call it, ‘cause of the light—there’s another blinking coming in less than a minute.”

She looks at him—and looks *different*, somehow, or maybe he’s seeing her properly for the first time. Beautiful, sure, but in a vaguely haunting way. Startlingly human but eerie, startlingly tired but excited. And—dare he say it? About the most reckless of the Torchwood agents?—startlingly *scared*.

And, quite suddenly, although the feeling seemed to have been creeping up on him gradually and silently as she spoke, he’s scared, too.

Rose reaches out to touch his hand. This time he doesn’t flinch.

“Remember,” she says in a small voice. “To put the glasses on.”

Notes for the Chapter:

So. Thoughts on Quentin? :)